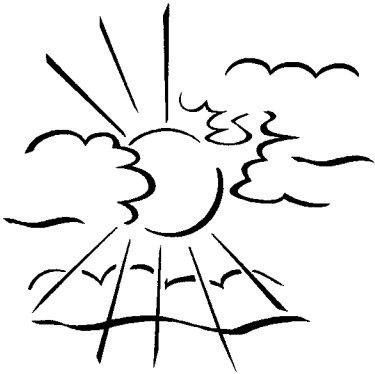


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Wednesday, October 26, 2005

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TOPIC	PAGE
*Health Care	2-12
*Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	13-26
*Juvenile Justice	27-33
Food Assistance	34-37
Energy Assistance	38
Domestic Violence	39
Homelessness	40
Living Wage	41-42
Early Childhood Development	43
Employee Benefits	44-45
Charities	46-47
Poverty	48
Welfare Reform	49

Michigan stands to lose big with Medicaid cuts

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Congress has put Medicaid on the chopping block, and Michigan officials say the result could be devastating for the state's poorest families.

A U.S. House committee will vote today on a proposal to trim federal Medicaid spending by \$11 billion over the next five years, a plan that could cost Michigan \$280 million annually.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm says the plan, which would prohibit states from using a tax on managed-care organizations to raise money to fund their Medicaid programs, would cause major budget trauma in Michigan and the three other states that already charge the tax -- California, Oregon and Pennsylvania.

"They cannot do this," said Granholm. "They cannot rip the safety net from under children and seniors and pregnant women."

Granholm says it's almost impossible to say where Michigan would get the money to offset a reduction of that size. The most likely option would be to shrink the number of Medicaid beneficiaries by narrowing eligibility for the health insurance program. Michigan has more than 1.4 million people in its \$7.5 billion Medicaid program.

"We will not be able to live with those cuts," said Granholm. "There is no place in the budget to find those dollars."

Congressional Republicans say what they're trying to do is bring some fiscal discipline to an out-of-control federal budget that has ballooned with spending for the war in Iraq and hurricane relief along the Gulf Coast.

They're also trying to implement a series of proposals offered up by the National Governors Association and endorsed by Granholm that would give governors more flexibility in administering Medicaid.

"There are not enough taxes to keep Medicaid going without reform," said Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which oversees Medicaid. "Common sense, state flexibility and personal responsibility can make Medicaid better and poor people healthier."

Earlier this year, the House and Senate approved a budget plan that would reduce federal spending by \$35 billion over the next five years. After approving nearly \$100 billion in disaster relief in the last month, GOP leaders now are feeling the need to adopt another \$15 billion in reductions.

But opponents of the House bill say the majority of the savings squeezed from Medicaid will likely be used to fill the financial hole that would be created by a GOP plan to extend billions of dollars in tax cuts over the next five years.

"We've got to come up with \$50 billion in program reductions because they want to put through \$106 billion in tax cuts," said Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee. "There's just no fiscal responsibility."

But all the news regarding the House bill isn't bad for Michigan.

Michigan would likely benefit from increased flexibility in establishing eligibility for beneficiaries and in setting copays for services. Michigan already uses copays as a way to control costs. They range from \$1 for outpatient hospital visits to \$50 for hospital stays.

The state also would benefit from a provision allowing states to create long-term care partnerships. In exchange for purchasing long-term care insurance to underwrite their nursing home stays, individuals would be allowed to keep more of their assets if they eventually ended up on Medicaid.

Proposed cuts in Medicaid could cost Michigan plenty

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

SARAH KELLOGG
SAGINAW NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Congress has put Medicaid on the chopping block, and Michigan officials say the result could devastate its poorest families.

A U.S. House committee was to vote today on a proposal to trim federal Medicaid spending by \$11 billion over the next five years, a plan that could cost Michigan \$280 million annually.

"It will put a good deal of pressure on state government and will take services away from the poor," said U.S. Rep. Dale E. Kildee, a Flint Democrat. "Hospitals often take in Medicaid and indigent patients, and they have to bear the burden for those. It's not a pleasant thing."

Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm said the plan, which would prohibit states from using a tax on managed-care organizations to raise money to fund their Medicaid efforts, would cause major budget trauma.

She said it's almost impossible to say where Michigan would get the money to offset a reduction of that size. Michigan has more than 1.4 million people in its \$7.5 billion Medicaid operation. Congressional Republicans say what they're trying to do is bring some fiscal discipline to an out-of-control federal budget that has ballooned with spending for the war in Iraq and hurricane relief along the Gulf Coast.

State Rep. Roger Kahn, a Saginaw Township Republican, said cuts to the poor look inevitable, because the state already is trying to slash \$115 million from the general fund.

Mastering the Medicare maze

What seniors need to know about picking drug coverage

By Sharon Terlep / The Detroit News

October 26, 2005

Madeleine Beaudet sat frazzled and resigned at her kitchen table on Monday, surrounded by fact sheets, pamphlets and a 98-page government-issued book.

The 82-year-old from Grosse Ile has been trying for weeks to decipher the new Medicare prescription drug plan, the landmark program that will offer drug coverage to more than 40 million seniors starting Jan. 1.

She visited her local pharmacy to ask for help. She attended a seminar that was supposed to explain the plan, but the speaker never showed. Her best information so far is some fact sheets sent to her by her son. "I'm frustrated," Beaudet said. "I think I'm better off to just pay for my insurance and forget it."

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed Beaudet is hardly alone.

Only one-third of seniors said they understand the drug plan well enough to know whether it would benefit them.

On Nov. 15, seniors can begin signing up for the Medicaid drug benefit. But many are finding the choices bewildering and the information overwhelming.

Medicare recipients face a staggering array of options and it's crucial to choose the right program.

Adding to the confusion, private insurance providers have started blitzing the airways with advertising.

The best bet is to sharpen your pencil, break out the calculator and keep the Excedrin handy. Here is some information and resources that might prevent the inevitable headache from turning into a migraine.

Q: Who's offering these drug plans?

A: Private and nonprofit insurance companies will offer drug plans, which will be subsidized by the federal government. National operations, such as Humana Insurance Company, have signed on, along with Michigan's major players, including Health Alliance Plan and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan.

Q: Is the Medicare coverage better than what's offered by most employers to their retirees?

A: That varies vastly depending on the plans. This is why it's important for seniors to understand their current benefits and be able

Medicare drug plan help

Important dates:

- Nov. 15 -- Enrollment period for the drug benefit begins.

- Jan. 1 -- Drug coverage starts.

- May 15 -- Last day to sign up without a penalty.

Help online:

- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services:

www.medicare.gov.

- Michigan Office of Services to the Aging:

www.miseniors.net/MiSeniors+Home/.

- Medicare Rights Center: www.medicarerights.org/ On the home page, check out "Medicare Drug Coverage 101: Everything You Need to Know About the New Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit."

- Kaiser Family Foundation: www.kff.org/.

Important numbers:

- Federal Medicare helpline: (800) 633-4227.

- Social Security Administration: (800) 772-1213.

- Department of Veterans Affairs: (800) 827-1000.

- Area Agency on Aging 1-B (covers Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair and Washtenaw counties): (800) 852-7795.

- Detroit Area Agency on Aging: (313) 446-4444. More on Medicare's drug plan

[Social Security Facts](#) about the new Medicare prescription drug benefit and an online tool to help people find out if they qualify.

[The official Medicare site](#)
[Learn more about the new Medicare prescription drug coverage](#)

[A three-page primer on major changes](#)

[AARP's take on the changes](#)

[Latest News](#)

[Lawmakers at impasse over Medicare subsidy](#)

[Agency's drug Web site not yet available](#)

[Report says Medicare easy target for fraud](#)

to compare them to what's being offered through Medicare. Seniors won't be penalized for keeping their employer-provided plan until it runs out as long as that plan is at least as good as what's offered through Medicare.

Q: Does this mean drugs will be provided free of charge?

A: The government will foot most of the bill for prescription drugs, but seniors will pay up to \$250 a year in co-payments, deductibles and monthly premiums. Monthly premiums for plans -- including medical, hospital and supplemental benefits as well as drug coverage -- offered in the Detroit area range from about \$22 to \$133. The average monthly fee for prescription coverage is \$32. Plans with higher monthly rates typically feature little or no deductibles, more medical and hospital benefits and options such as mail order drugs.

Q: How are the drug plans different?

A: Michigan's seniors can pick from 65 different Medicare health plans. Of those, at least 38 will include prescription coverage. The major differences between plans lie in which prescription drugs are covered, how much the plan costs, which pharmacies are covered and what coverage is included.

Q: What drugs will the prescription plans cover?

A: All plans must cover medications for cancer, HIV/AIDS, depression, epilepsy and other convulsive conditions, as well as antipsychotic medications and immunosuppressants typically given to transplant recipients.

Drugs not covered include: medicine for anorexia, weight loss or weight gain, drugs for cosmetic purposes, cold medicines, barbiturates and benzodiazepines, which are a class of tranquilizers. Vitamins, mineral products and nonprescription drugs also won't be covered.

Q: How do you find out what's covered?

A: Each plan has a list, called a formulary, of drugs covered. Each plan is required to carry at least two drugs from each therapeutic class, or treatment area. Patients will have to pay the full cost of any drug not on the formulary. If a drug isn't on the formulary but is medically necessary, a patient can request that the plan cover that drug.

Q: What happens to seniors who don't sign up by the final deadline -- May 15?

A: They'll be slapped with higher monthly rates. Seniors can sign up after the deadline, but will face a penalty for doing so. Anyone who lacks drug coverage that the government has determined is at least as good as the Medicare plans will be penalized. Those seniors will pay an additional 1 percent in monthly premiums for every month they delay signing up. For example, someone who waits until May 2007 to sign up will pay premiums that are 12 percent higher.

Q: What help is in place for low-income seniors?

A: Low-income seniors will be eligible for subsidies depending on their annual income and assets. For example, a single senior who makes less than \$9,570 a year and has less than \$2,000 in assets will pay no deductible or premium and will pay a \$3 co-pay for a brand-name drug. On the higher end, a couple that has an annual income less than \$19,245 and up to \$20,000 in assets would have a \$50 deductible and pay premiums on a sliding scale. The Social Security Administration is mailing applications to seniors likely to be eligible for extra help.

Q: What's the deal with the so-called coverage gap?

A: Seniors who spend up to \$2,250 on prescription drugs will pay 25 percent of costs. Those who have a drug bill greater than \$5,100 will pay no more than 5 percent or \$5 for each brand-name prescription. The gap applies to seniors who spend more than \$2,250 but less than \$5,100. They'll have to pay the full cost of their medication. Some extra help is available for people who will fall in the gap category.

Q: Where can people go if they want to talk to someone in person about picking a plan?

A: Anyone eligible for the Medicare drug coverage should have received the government's 98-page "Medicare & You" book. There's a plethora of information online as well as federal and state help phone lines. There's in-person help as well in Metro Detroit. The Area Agency on Aging will host at least 18 special workshops throughout southeast Michigan over the next few months. The first session is from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Nov. 15 at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

You can reach Sharon Terlep at (313)223-4686 or sterlep@detnews.com.

Prescription drug plan options

Seniors can start enrolling in the new Medicare prescription drug plans starting Nov. 15.

Here's what's available to residents in Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties:

Plan	Type of plan	Total premium*	Drug deductible	Mail order offered
Alliance Medicare HMO	Local preferred provider organization	\$113 or \$132	None	Yes
Blue Care Network	Health management organization	\$39 or \$60	\$250 or none	Yes
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan	Private	\$93.59 or \$124.86	None	Yes
Fidelis SecureCare of Michigan	Health management organization	\$33	\$250	No
HAP Senior Plus HMO	Health management organization	\$50 to \$117	\$0	Yes
Humana Insurance Company	Regional preferred provider organization	\$46 to \$133	Either none or lower than \$250	Yes
Midwest Advantage (Oakland and Wayne counties only)	Health management organization	\$21.94	\$250	No
Molina Healthcare of Michigan	Health management organization	\$33.22	\$250	No

*Includes medical, hospital, prescription drug and supplemental benefits

Source: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

The Detroit News

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

Bus tour offers prescription coverage help Southfield residents learn how to apply for free or low-cost medicines offered by drug companies, others.

By Delores Patterson / The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD -- Those who lack prescription drug coverage now can gain better access to aid programs through the Partnership for Prescription Assistance of Michigan.

As part of a national effort to help low-income families and those who are uninsured, the organization's "Help is Here Express" bus stopped Tuesday at the Southfield Public Library to raise awareness of the more than 475 patient assistance programs.

Making its way across the country with planned stops in Detroit and Lansing, the bus is equipped with 10 computers, telephones and staff to help residents learn how to apply for free or low-cost medicines offered by pharmaceutical companies and through other public and private programs, said Arlene Gorelick, president of the Epilepsy Foundation of Michigan, which is involved in the initiative. The Partnership for Prescription Assistance was launched in April and has more than 50 national organizations, such as the American Academy of Family Physicians, involved in creating an information clearinghouse to identify corporate, government and local prescription drug assistance plans and the criteria for participation. The Michigan arm of the group has more than 20 health and civic partners.

"There are about 704,000 uninsured people in Michigan who have problems getting the prescription drugs they need, along with those who are on tight budgets. So we are bringing together as many programs as possible so people can do a sort of a one-stop shop to get the medications they need," Gorelick said.

Residents can go to a Web site set up by the organization and get directed to a prescription drug program. There also is a toll-free number.

"This is wonderful," said Farmington resident Carl Anderson, who is on a fixed income that barely covers his medications and other living expenses.

"It will be good so people don't have to choose between their taking several medications a month to survive, which can cost several hundred dollars, and something else that may also be just as essential," he said. "No one should have to be in that position."

If participants meet income requirements, they may be eligible for free medications or may qualify for a low-cost payment to receive prescriptions from groups like the Greater Detroit Area Health Council, Gorelick said.

Prescription program
For information or to
enroll in the new
Prescription Drug
Assistance Program,
visit www.pparxmi.org
or call (888) 477-2669.

You can reach Delores Patterson at (248) 647-7225 or dpatterson@detnews.com.

The Grand Rapids Press

Letters for October 26

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

Nationalize health care

Holland teachers, Grand Valley State University employees, General Motors employees and retirees, parish nurses, anyone's name here. What do these folks have in common? They are all victims of a totally bankrupt health care system in the country.

Every day now we read about the ever-escalating cost of health care. It doesn't have to be that way. The United States is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't have some kind of national health care program.

Over 50 million people in this country have no form of health care now and the list continues to grow. Not only are people dying due to lack of health care, our national productivity is being adversely affected and our ability to compete, in the world, is being diminished.

We need to pull our collective heads out of the morass created by for-profit health care insurers and create a national single-payer system that will provide health care for all of our citizens. Our representatives in Congress need to be told to get their priorities straight and solve this problem now.

The moral statement that our national budget makes needs to be changed. We need to care for all our citizens, not just the wealthy who are benefiting from the tax cuts of the Bush administration. Those tax cuts are not reducing health care costs and may, in fact be adding to them. At the very least, those tax cuts make a moral statement that is very much out of line with the Christian values that the Bush administration seems to claim.

JIM SEARLS/Zeeland

Everyone has chance at flu shot this year

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

By Shantell M. Kirkendoll

skirkendoll@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6366

GENESEE COUNTY - The rush is on for flu shots now that restrictions have been lifted, allowing the young and healthy to be inoculated.

Unlike years past, health care providers have shots to administer.

"Last year was the worst," said Dr. James Brown, a Mt. Morris family practitioner with Genesys Health System, said of previous flu shot shortages. "This year we ordered through a private company who brought 45 shots to a clinic this weekend and 40 patients were vaccinated."

On Monday at Atlas Township Hall, Visiting Nurse Services of Michigan administered 100 shots, where 100-120 had been expected.

Public health officials had been asked to inoculate only at-risk populations, such as the elderly, until Oct. 24, but not to turn away adults who insisted on getting a vaccine.

Shots have gone up in price - \$25-\$28 versus \$18-\$20 last year - but have remained a hot item for seniors and those with heart or lung problems whose bouts with flu could be severe.

The vaccine reduces the chance of getting the headache, fever and chills that come with flu and takes three weeks to become effective.

Every year in the United States, 5 percent to 20 percent of the population gets the flu and more than 200,000 are hospitalized.

"In medicine, we consider what's called benefit versus cost," Brown said. "In the case of the flu shot, the benefit far outweighs the cost. I think patients have learned that, and parents are responding to campaigns to get toddlers vaccinated."

In Jan Grissom's case, it pays to be vaccinated because she has family members are considerably older.

"I'm going to Arizona soon, and I'm flying, to see my parents who are in their 80s," said Grissom, 51, of Burton. "They've had their flu shots and so have I."

A doctor suggested Peter Toporek, 58, of Burton, get a flu shot because of his past heart problems and diabetes. He gets one every year.

But it took recent bird flu worries to get real estate agent Sherron Garrow, 58, of Grand Blanc, to join the flu shot line that started in the greeting card aisle at Thrifty Drugs on Monday.

"I never had one in my life," said Garrow, who received a shot from a VNS nurse. "I don't remember the last time I had the flu either. But I don't know about this new weird one."

She was referring to bird flu, which is not in the United States but has been deadly in Southeast Asia and is spreading to birds in Europe.

The vaccine for this flu season does not provide protection against bird flu. But protecting people against conventional flu could make them stronger against a new illness, health experts said.

McLaren Medical Management has run out of shots to send to doctors' offices in Flint, Lansing, Lapeer and Bay City, said Sherry Collins, a McLaren Regional Medical Center spokeswoman.

So far, the offices have given 7,800 shots. More are on the way, she said, for a total of 27,000 doses. A second shipment is expected by Nov. 15, and a third shipment after that. Half of the Genesee County Health Department's supply has arrived, said Mark Valacak, director of the county's Division of Community Health, for their flu shot clinics that begin Nov. 1. On the web: www.gchd.us Genesee County Health Department

Sex Offenders See New Limits for Halloween

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

The New York Times

Published: October 26, 2005

In Westchester County, high-risk sex offenders on probation will be required to attend a four-hour educational program on Halloween night. In New Jersey, state officials are instructing paroled sex criminals not to answer their doors if trick-or-treaters come knocking. And in counties throughout Texas, parolees with child contact restrictions are being told to stay away from Halloween activities, even family gatherings.

All across the country this year, local and state authorities are placing registered offenders under one-night curfews or other restrictions out of fear that in only a few days, costumed children asking for candy will be arriving on their doorsteps.

The measures come at a time of growing unease about the nation's most dangerous sexual predators. In the last year, two small children were abducted and killed in Florida and a 56-year-old woman was stabbed to death at a mall in downtown White Plains, all at the hands of registered sex offenders, the authorities say.

Most states classify sex offenders by their likelihood of committing new crimes while on parole or probation, but do not distinguish between pedophiles and those whose crimes are against adults.

In effectively detaining sex offenders on Halloween, most officials say they are not responding to any attacks known to have occurred on past holidays but are concerned that the occasion presents a tantalizing opportunity for offenders to have unsupervised contact with children. "Here you have a unique situation where children are literally showing up at the doors of sex offenders," said Andrew J. Spano, the Westchester County executive, who announced his initiative yesterday.

Almost all of the new measures are aimed at people already tightly supervised: those on parole or on probation. They are typically in force in the late afternoon and evening, and call for the offenders to either attend treatment programs for several hours or to stay at home and not hand out candy. In those cases, probation and local police officers will go to the homes to ensure compliance, the authorities said.

At least a half-dozen states have enacted such laws, including Texas, New Jersey and Illinois. One state, Virginia, has had a program in place since 2002 called Operation Trick No Treat, in which high-risk offenders must report to their parole offices between 4:30 and 8 p.m. on Halloween, where many undergo treatment.

Jo G. Holland, director for the eastern region of the Virginia Department of Corrections, said it has been successful.

"The interesting thing is that some of those who had not been specifically instructed to come in show up anyway, because they assume maybe we forgot to tell them," she said.

But yesterday, civil libertarians and advocates for victims criticized the new measures as incomplete solutions and, in some cases, politically timed. Carolyn Atwell-Davis, the director of legislative affairs for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, applauded the efforts but pointed out that most children are victimized by people they know, not by strangers. And by focusing on one night of the year, the restrictions will have limited value, she said.

"I think there are other measures that are better able to protect children on every day of the year, not just one night," she said. "But it's good in that it will at least let sex offenders know that the authorities are in fact monitoring them."

Donna Lieberman, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said the new initiatives were a "headline-grabbing response to a serious public health and safety issue" and failed to differentiate between sex offenders whose crimes were against adults and those who focused on children.

"One has to wonder whether this is simply political posturing in time for upcoming elections," she said.

The measures come as many states are pushing for new restrictions on sex offenders, including monitoring them electronically and keeping them locked up indefinitely after being released from prison. That measure, called civil confinement, is now in place in more than a dozen states, but in New York a bill that would create it has been stalled in the State Assembly for months. More than 500,000 sex offenders are registered throughout the United States, but only a fraction will be affected by the new Halloween rules.

In New Jersey, for example, where the murder of a young girl in 1994 led to the creation of the law that established the model for sex offender registries, known as Megan's Law, about 2,200 offenders will be affected. But the roughly 6,000 who committed their crimes before the law was passed will not.

Still, Edward Bray, the acting deputy executive director of the New Jersey State Parole Board, said the plan was necessary.

"The State Parole Board has been trying in the last year to be more proactive," he said. "And Halloween seemed like a time that was ripe for so many potential abuses and risks to children."

Sex offender sweep ongoing

Police looking for those who haven't updated residence

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

BY LIZ COBBS

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Michigan State Police Trooper Brian Keely and Sgt. Chris Pascoe were in Chelsea on Monday looking for the last known address of a 26-year-old registered sex offender.

The man has a bench warrant for his arrest for failing to appear in court on a sex offender registry offense.

The last address the man gave was 18901 Waterloo Road, but that location turned out to be the state Department of Corrections' Cassidy Lake Special Alternative Incarceration facility. A quick records check by Cassidy Lake officials showed the man had been released in 1999.

He had been using the Waterloo Road address since April, according to his state criminal record, which shows a conviction on a fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct offense.

The search for the man by Keely and Pascoe on Monday was part of a countywide sweep for violators of the sex offender registry. It was designed to track down convicted sex offenders who either have not verified their address or failed to report a change of address. After discovering that the Chelsea address was wrong, Keely and Pascoe were able to obtain two other addresses in Wayne and Washtenaw counties where they could possibly find the offender.

"This is not a random patrol, this is a target patrol," Pascoe said. "You aren't waiting for them to come to you, you're looking for them."

Local police departments periodically check on residences of sex offenders, but authorities said Monday's sweep was the first coordinated, countywide effort. The sweep included officers from the Ann Arbor, Pittsfield and Ypsilanti police departments, the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department, the state police, and Michigan Department of Corrections officers from Washtenaw County's Circuit Court Probation Department.

Police went to last-known addresses of about 125 convicted sex offenders, some of whom have absconded, having failed to report a change of address since at least 2000.

Statistics on the number of arrests and warrants issued were not available Monday. In some instances, officers could not determine whether an offender actually lived at an address because no one was home, so they would have to return later. In other instances, officers were able to confirm that the offenders were no longer living at their last-known addresses.

Michigan's Sex Offender Registry Act requires individuals convicted of a sex crime to register their address with their local law enforcement agency. Offenders must verify their addresses with the police either yearly or quarterly, depending on the conviction.

According to the Sex Offender Registry Act, an offender who does not verify an address can be charged with a misdemeanor, punishable by up to 93 days in jail. Offenders who fail to report a change of address can be charged with a felony. The maximum prison term would depend on whether the individuals have prior convictions for violating the act.

State Police Trooper Eric Byerly, who coordinated the countywide sweep, said Michigan has the third highest number of registered sex offenders nationally - about 38,400 - with about 200 added each month. California has the most with 103,000, followed by Texas with 46,500, Byerly said. In Michigan, statewide compliance to the Sex Offender Registry Act is 67 percent, which Byerly said is "pretty dismal."

The total number of registered sex offenders in Washtenaw County was not available.

Local police agencies around the state have been taking proactive steps to monitor the whereabouts of sex offenders to see if they are in compliance with the law.

Canton Township police conducted their first sweep in May, checking the records of 64 residents on the sex offenders list. "We realized that people come in and make their initial requirements, but there was nothing in place to check and make sure they were in compliance," said John Santomauro, Canton's public safety director.

Santomauro said six people were charged with a misdemeanor for failing to verify their address and two people were charged with a felony for failing to change their address.

Law enforcement can also use the sex offender registry as an investigative tool, Keely said. If sex-related crimes are committed in a certain area, police investigators can get the names from the registry of previous sex offenders who live in the area where the crimes were committed and question them. It's important, however, that the registry is kept up to date.

"It's a good investigative tool, but it's only good if it's accurate," Keely said.

The Michigan Sex Offender Registry is available to the public online at www.mipsor.state.mi.us.

Liz Cobbs can be reached at lcobbs@annarbornews.com or (734) 994-6810.

Police continue hunt for suspect

Cadillac News

October 26, 2005

CADILLAC - No new information was available in the Cadillac Police Department's search for a man who allegedly picked up a 15-year-old girl Monday on her way to school.

A police department receptionist said police had no further information for a press release.

On Monday, police reported a man described as a white male in his 30s with shaggy brown hair, bad teeth and driving a small red car, was sought after he allegedly took the girl to a park and touched her inappropriately. The girl reportedly then fled the vehicle.

Anyone with information is asked to call 775-3491 or the Silent Observer program.

Jury takes 90 minutes to convict man of rape

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By Tim Younkman
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

A Bay County Circuit Court jury deliberated only 90 minutes Tuesday before finding a Bay City man guilty of raping three girls in separate assaults in April.

Ricky J. Aikens, 42, of 906 S. Henry St., was convicted of nine counts of first degree criminal sexual conduct, two counts of third-degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of extortion in incidents that took place from April 4-6. He now faces a maximum sentence of life in prison. Following a week of testimony, the trial ended when the jury of eight women and four men returned with the verdict of guilty on all counts late Tuesday afternoon.

Bay County Prosecutor Joseph K. Sheeran said he was pleased with the swift verdict.

"These assaults were particularly brutal and we are recommending that Aikens be given a very long prison sentence," Sheeran said. "I believe these victims were very courageous in coming forward and testifying to stop this from going on."

He also praised investigators and Assistant Prosecutor Richard Dresser in securing the verdicts.

"This is one of the worst cases we have seen here," he said.

In an unusual move Monday, Aikens took the witness stand in his own defense, claiming DNA evidence on victims' clothing, in a bed, a sofa, blanket and in his pickup truck was left by him as he engaged in masturbation and not in sexual contact with the three girls.

He claimed to have been stimulated by Playboy magazines he had in his truck and in the house, although investigators did not find any of the magazines.

"Someone must have took 'em," Aikens testified.

"I go fishin' and I had the books in the truck," he said, trying to explain how his DNA appeared on a thong and sweat pants belonging to one of the girls that were found in his truck.

The girl told police she was assaulted in the truck by Aikens when he drove behind a local furniture store where he regularly went to collect discarded furniture and mattresses.

One of the victims testified she had been molested by Aikens for 11 years since she was 5 years old. The other girls also said they were molested on numerous occasions over a long period of time.

Aikens further claimed that leg irons and handcuffs found by police in his house were not used on the victims, despite their claims.

Dresser showed the jury a letter written by Aikens to his wife when he first was jailed that indicated he had fired Bay City attorney George Bush - who originally represented Aikens - because Bush told him he could make a deal with the prosecution and get him 20 years in prison instead of life.

Aikens fired Bush and planned to represent himself so he would get 100 years in prison, Dresser noted the letter proclaimed.

"He said he was sorry, in this letter," Dresser said. "Sorry for what? If he didn't do it, what is he sorry for?"

Dresser also noted that after proclaiming his sorrow, he advised his wife to send him money.

"Sell my things," the letter stated, so the money could be placed in an inmate account at the jail.

Dresser advised jurors that they had a choice deciding which witness to believe and whether the testimony of the victims outweighed Aikens' version of the incidents.

Circuit Judge Lawrence M. Bielawski ordered Aikens to be jailed without bond pending sentencing on Dec. 1.

- Tim Younkman covers area police agencies and courts for The Times. He can be reached at 894-965, or by e-mail at tyounkman@bc-times.com.

Video cams on school buses last word in curbing rowdies

FLUSHING

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By Beata Mostafavi

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FLUSHING - When sharp barbs between two girls on a bus started to escalate into something more serious at Flushing High School a month ago, there was more than one version of what happened.

But a security camera on the bus helped administrators sort through the jumbled reports that came from the girls and about eight witnesses. That helped officials determine what disciplinary measures to take.

It's becoming much more common for security cameras to be used as an extra set of eyes on school buses, officials say.

School officials and those in the security business say cameras can prevent altercations, clear up facts after an incident and protect districts against possible lawsuits.

"People oftentimes make accusations about things that happen on the bus," Flushing Township Police Chief Douglas Kennedy said. "The cameras can either prove or disprove those accusations."

A bus fight that landed two Flushing teenagers in the hospital with head injuries last year spiked awareness among parents about how hostile words can spawn violence on bus rides.

Michelle Fortelka, whose 14-year-old son was on the bus route where the fight erupted last year but was not involved, said cameras are a good idea.

"It will help sort through who did what, but as far as prevention, I don't know if that will make kids think twice," she said. "It will show who started it."

"I think they've done what they can," she added of the district's efforts to keep buses safe.

A growing number of area school districts are getting on board with bus cameras, said Mark Campbell, sales representative with Advanced Wireless.

Over the past two years, the company installed camera security systems on buses for Grand Blanc, Flushing and Davison. The cameras cost an average of \$2,000 installed.

"(Districts) are dealing with a lot more liability," Campbell said. "It's irrefutable proof when something happens."

The Genesee Intermediate School

District is in the process of installing cameras on 20 buses this year, and the Flint School District also has cameras.

Flint Transportation Supervisor Don Kutchev said the district adds cameras on buses as needed, mostly to help officials deal with rowdy students or to investigate parent complaints.

Flushing high-schooler Liz Cantwil, 16, rode the bus four years. She said that sometimes kids taunted one another, but she always felt safe.

Cameras could keep some kids from acting up, but not others.

"I think it does prevent it, but I don't think it would influence kids that had really serious problems before," she said.

E-mail law upsets parents

Indecent messages still reach children

October 25, 2005

BY KORTNEY STRINGER

FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

Michigan's new law to protect children from viewing pornography and other adult e-mail ads so far hasn't done much of anything -- except irk parents.

What's covered

Under Michigan's do not e-mail registry, categories include, but are not limited to:

Alcohol

Tobacco

Pornography or obscene material

Gambling

Lotteries

Illegal drugs

Fireworks

Firearms

To register or get more information in Michigan, go to www.protectmichild.com.

Beginning Aug. 1, the Michigan Children's Protection Registry Act was supposed to stop companies from sending messages pitching products and services that are illegal for minors to use to e-mail addresses on a state-maintained list. But the law hasn't been effective because it isn't being enforced -- or advertised much -- while the state Legislature tidies up some of its language.

Two bills -- one to clarify the maximum amount Michigan can charge to ensure marketers' lists comply with the state registry and another to make it easier and more affordable for small mom-and-pop shops to comply with the law -- have passed the state Senate but are yet to be approved by the House and signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

If all goes well, Michigan says the law could be enforced as early as the end of this month. But that's little consolation to the 3,000 parents and 27 schools that have been signed up for the registry since July.

Talia Goetting, a Ferndale mother of an 8-year-old, said she was looking forward to the protection she thought her daughter would get from the new law when she signed up for the registry last summer. Now, she laments about the questionable e-mails her daughter still gets about male enhancement drugs. (Those e-mails would be included under the law if they were illegal for a child to purchase or view.) "What was the whole point in signing up if it's not doing any good? Is this just the legislature and the governor trying to look good and tough, but in the end, just kicking up dust?" said Goetting, who now scans her daughter's e-mails before allowing her to read them. "I'm doing what I hoped was going to be done by the registry. I feel like they're duping people."

Letters pour in

The Michigan Public Service Commission, charged with enforcing the law, and the office of state Sen. Mike Bishop, who helped to sponsor the law, have received calls, e-mails and letters from angry parents.

"There is a growing tide of parents who're demanding their kids get the protection the legislation has promised them," said Matthew Prince, CEO of Unspam Registry Services Inc., which operates the systems that ensure companies' compliance with the laws and passes on to Michigan the e-mails from parents. "There is definitely a sense from parents who've signed up that they expected the law to come into enforcement when it was scheduled to and they are disappointed." This isn't the first time the Michigan law has come under fire.

Michigan and Utah drew controversy this summer when they became the first states to create do-not-e-mail registries targeting children, which are essentially databases of e-mail addresses similar to the federal do-not-call registry that prohibits most telemarketing calls to numbers on the list. By comparison, the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 permits sending e-mails to any address as long as the recipient has the opportunity to opt out of future communications.

Michigan's do-not-e-mail law takes that a step further by making companies responsible for ensuring messages don't reach addresses on the list if they are marketing products and services that minors are prohibited from "purchasing, viewing, possessing, participating in or otherwise receiving."

A first violation would be a misdemeanor, while multiple violations would be felonies, punishable by up to three years in jail and a \$30,000 fine. Additionally, companies that violate the law could be forced to pay civil penalties.

But while Utah is implementing its registry, Michigan has yet to enforce companies' compliance with the law even though parents can continue to get their children's addresses on the list.

Now, those who once praised the law are criticizing it. "I haven't seen any advertisements or anything," about the Michigan law, said Pat Sorenson, spokeswoman for child-advocacy group Michigan's

Children, and a mother of three. "We need the strongest protections for our children who're using the Internet."

Meanwhile, the nation's first do-not-e-mail laws continue to draw scrutiny and warnings from marketing groups and affected businesses that say the cost of compliance with the law isn't practical and its penalties for violations are so stiff that it might discourage many smaller companies from e-mail marketing efforts altogether.

Under Michigan's law, companies are expected to remove e-mail addresses on the state registry from their mailing lists within 30 days of their registration into the system. To do this, companies will be charged \$0.007 cent by the state for each e-mail address checked. For example, a marketer with a million e-mail addresses on its mailing list would pay \$7,000 to scrub the list one time. If that process were repeated each month, the company would wind up spending about \$84,000 a year. Additionally, marketers say the laws are too vague since they're not product-specific, leaving potentially broad government interpretation. And some say they are counterproductive because they might actually create more avenues for unscrupulous businesses to specifically target children.

Hard to enforce

Furthermore, some critics say the Michigan law is ineffective because it will be almost impossible to enforce.

Trevor Hughes, executive director of Email Service Provider Coalition, a trade group of 80 e-mail service providers, said while the organization is sympathetic to the issues the Michigan law is trying to address, he believes the law won't stop the flow of unwanted e-mails to children.

"Everyone's looking for a silver bullet, but this is not it," he said. "This law suggests every pornographer should scrub their lists against the registry in Michigan. It's very difficult to enforce that. We frequently say many spammers enjoy the impunity of anonymity."

"Just because you have a good goal in mind, doesn't mean you'll reach a good result," said Dan Jaffe, vice president of government relations for the Association of National Advertisers, a group of 350 advertisers that's exploring potential challenges to the laws. "These are vague laws that have not been clearly thought out."

But for now, Michigan has even bigger fish to fry than the potential legal challenges it might face from marketers. Since the law is voluntary and it hasn't been enforced or advertised much in its first few months, the state says it must again figure out how to drum up awareness and excitement among Michigan parents if the language in the bill is remodeled and compliance begins.

"There are thoughts about how we will re-educate the public about this law," once it's being enforced, said Dennis Darnoi, a spokesman for Bishop's office. "There's definitely concern too much time has passed."

News

Kids' personal data easy to obtain

Wednesday, October 26, 2005 12:39 PM EDT

An unsolicited mailing sparks a Tecumseh parent's concern about who has access to schoolchildren's addresses and phone numbers.

By Justin R. Kalmes

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

TECUMSEH - When Donna Woudenberg received four letters from a religious instruction organization addressed to the parents/guardians of each of her children, her mother's instinct kicked in. She called other parents of Tecumseh elementary school students and learned they had received similar mailings.

If it was that easy for the group that sent the letters to obtain the names and addresses of school children, she wondered, who else could get their hands on similar information? "Could any child molester walk in and say, 'I want a list of every child and their address,' " she asked.

They sure could, said Dawn Hertz, general counsel to the Michigan Press Association. Under the state's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), she said, there isn't a restriction on who can gain access to lists that include information such as a student's name, address and telephone listing.

"The only people not eligible to use FOIA are prisoners," Hertz said.

For those wishing to have their child's name removed from a student directory, Hertz said, the only option would be to submit a request to the district, under provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, to withhold information available through the FOIA.

Tecumseh Public Schools Superintendent Michael McAran said the requester who sent the letters Woudenberg was referring to was David Kurowicki, a missionary for RBM Ministries. According to the mailing Kurowicki sent, the Michigan-based group teaches Bible courses that are available to public school children because of a state law that allows the release of students to attend religious instruction classes for up to two hours per week. McAran said Kurowicki filed an affidavit requesting the names and addresses of all first- through fourth-graders in the district.

"He's not soliciting, he's just giving them information," McAran said.

He said the law firm representing the district stated in a letter last year that FOIA permits schools to release directory information "if the school determines that the proposed use is consistent with

the education mission of the school and beneficial to the affected students.”

At the beginning of the school year, all Tecumseh residents should have received a district information guide that contained a form to request to withhold release of student directory information. The district needed to receive the form by Sept. 1, otherwise it was assumed that the directory information could be released for the remainder of the current school year. According to the information guide, a new student directory information exclusion form must be completed each year.

Kurowicki said he teaches the Bible courses to elementary students in Jackson, Washtenaw and Lenawee counties. He said though he represents a religious organization, law requires public schools to treat him like they would anybody else.

As for the informational letters, he said they have been successful in getting parents to sign their children up for the classes.

Woudenberg said she's considering taking the issue to Lansing in hopes of getting the law changed so that directory information isn't automatically available through FOIA. She said she would rather require school districts to have permission to release the information instead of making it public unless an exclusion form is submitted.

“This is a big issue and parents don't know about it,” she said.

Life of civil rights leader speaks to children

In interview, Rosa Parks urged young people to choose education

The Detroit News

October 26, 2005

Rosa Parks spent much of her life promoting the causes of children. In 1997, Scholastic, the children's publishing company, asked about her message to today's young people. Here's what she said:

I always encourage children to stay in school, get good grades and to believe in themselves. Of course they should take care of their health and keep themselves from certain things that would be detrimental to them either physically or mentally.

They should be sure to get the best education that they can and choose careers that they can be progressive in as they go into their adulthood.

In our Pathways to Freedom Institute and our Institute for Self Development, we take young people on trips and give them opportunities to meet many civil rights leaders. We teach them to be good citizens and do what they can do to help other people as they become successful themselves.

I urge children to have a spiritual awareness in their lives. If children work towards a positive goal in life, it will help them be successful when they become adults.

People need to free their minds of racial prejudice and believe in equality for all and freedom regardless of race.

We need much more education -- especially those who are narrow-minded. We need as much financial security as we can get. I think it would be a good thing if all people were treated equally and justly and not be discriminated against because of race or religion or anything that makes them different from others.

There is still as much racism among some people. It still exists, but we are not under the legally enforced segregation that we used to be. There are still people who are prejudiced because of race. The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute accepts people of any race. We don't discriminate against anyone.... I set examples by the way I lead my life.

Senator wants to bar sentencing juveniles to life without parole

10/25/2005, 6:03 p.m. ET

By DAVID EGGERT The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A state lawmaker wants to prohibit Michigan juveniles from being sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Sen. Liz Brater, D-Ann Arbor, announced a four-bill package Tuesday she said would give children convicted of violent crimes a second chance at life by giving them a chance for parole. Brater said keeping people under age 18 from voting or serving on a jury while saying they're old enough to serve life in prison sets a dangerous double standard.

"These children have committed horrible crimes, and must be held accountable for their actions," she said. "No one is saying these individuals should get off with just a slap on the wrist, but locking them away forever ignores the fact that there is a chance they could eventually become productive members of society."

Brater, along with the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, cited a recent study by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International showing Michigan has the second-highest rate of imposing life sentences without parole on juveniles.

The ACLU says 306 prisoners in the state are serving life sentences without a chance of parole for crimes committed before the age of 18. Almost half of them, or 146, committed their crimes while age 16 or younger.

Critics of the current law noted that some juveniles are serving life without parole for felony murder, where those involved in a crime during which a death results are guilty of murder, regardless of whether they committed the killing.

"Many of them were not the ones who pulled the trigger. They deserve a second chance, and at the very least, a second look," said Deborah LaBelle, an attorney who oversaw the ACLU's report on juveniles serving life without parole.

It is unclear, though, whether Republicans in the GOP-controlled Legislature are open to changing the law.

Sen. Alan Cropsey, a DeWitt Republican who heads the Senate Judiciary Committee, said victims should not be forgotten when considering sentencing changes.

"Public safety has to trump everything," he said. "What is society being protected from? That certainly has got to be one of the major things we look when we talk about public safety."

Michigan ranks second in the number of juvenile lifers for several reasons. The state considers offenders to be adults once they reach 17, unlike other states that say adulthood starts at 18.

Also, prosecutors have discretion to charge juveniles as adults while judges have less flexibility in sentencing. A conviction for first-degree murder carries mandatory life-in-prison sentence.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International say at least 2,225 juvenile offenders are serving life sentences without chance of parole in the United States, compared to a total of 12 elsewhere in the world.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has said she is open to considering changes in the current law.

"We're not open to giving people a get-out-of-jail free card," spokeswoman Liz Boyd said recently. "But we're open to the concept of allowing juveniles to go before a parole board."

On the Net:

Sen. Liz Brater: <http://www.senate.mi.gov/brater/>
<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/us1005/>

October 25, 2005

BRATER CALLS FOR PAROLE OPTION FOR JUVENILES

Individuals under 18 convicted of serious crimes would have to have the option of parole at some point under legislation Sen. Liz Brater (D-Ann Arbor) said on Tuesday she is introducing.

The bill would prohibit anyone under 18 of being sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. Ms. Brater said anyone convicted of a crime serious enough to be sentenced to life without parole needs to be punished severely, but a young person also needs to have another chance at life outside prison.

Parole would not be automatic for those individuals. They would still have to go through parole hearings. The only difference they would see compared to someone older than 18 is that they could not be sentenced without the possibility of parole.

Ms. Brater also said she wanted the legislation, if passed, to be applied retroactively.

A study recently released by the American Civil Liberties Union said there are 306 prisoners in the state sentenced to life without parole who committed their crimes before turning 18. Not quite half of those prisoners, 146, committed their crimes before the age of 16.

Sen. Alan Cropsey (R-DeWitt), chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he was uncertain if he would take up the bills. Studies that look at the sentencing of prisoners rarely take into consideration the victims of the crimes, he said.

“I’m not ruling it out,” he said. But since life imprisonment without parole is usually reserved either for first degree murder or felony murder, Mr. Cropsey said approval might require determining if the option for parole can be limited to some crimes and not others.

Bills would halt life with no parole for juveniles

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By The Associated Press

LANSING - State Sen. Liz Brater wants to prohibit Michigan juveniles from being sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The Ann Arbor Democrat announced a four-bill package Tuesday she said would give children convicted of violent crimes a second chance at life by giving them a chance for parole.

"These children have committed horrible crimes, and must be held accountable for their actions," she said. "No one is saying these individuals should get off with just a slap on the wrist, but locking them away forever ignores the fact that there is a chance they could eventually become productive members of society."

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It is unclear, though, whether Republicans in the GOP-controlled Legislature are open to changing the law.

Sen. Alan Cropsey, a DeWitt Republican who heads the Senate Judiciary Committee, said victims should not be forgotten when considering sentencing changes.

"Public safety has to trump everything," he said. "What is society being protected from? That certainly has got to be one of the major things we look when we talk about public safety."

Trial's focus is teen's intent in Romeo stabbing

Prosecution says he 'boasted and laughed'

PUBLISHED: October 26, 2005

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Whether a teenager intended to kill or injure his ex-girlfriend when he stabbed her in the back in Romeo High School will be the key question in the case against him this week in his Macomb Circuit Court trial, attorneys said.

Lawyers for the prosecution and defense laid out their arguments to a 14-person jury Tuesday to start the attempted-murder trial of Eric Schorling, now 17, who stabbed and wounded Nicole Lambert, now 17, about 13 months ago in the high school's hallway.

"He never had intent to kill her," Schorling's attorney, Arthur Garton, told the jury. "We're conceding great bodily harm. He did everything he could to avoid this. (But) he acted impulsively. He thinks like a kid. He acts like a kid. And he reacted like a kid."

But assistant Macomb prosecutor Steven Kaplan argued to the jury that the "only conclusion you can make" is that Schorling wanted to kill her. His death wish is revealed by his actions prior to, during and after the incident, Kaplan said.

"Eric Schorling indicated to another classmate that he intended to stab or kill Nicole" on the Saturday before the Monday morning incident, Kaplan said.

On the day of the stabbing, "He plunged a knife into Nicole's back as far as the knife would go. He actually boasted and laughed about what he did. He was pleased with his performance."

Garton countered to jurors: "Eric never said he was pleased with his performance. You're not going to hear he boasted, laughed about it."

Schorling, who Monday turned down an agreement to plead guilty in exchange for an 8-year minimum sentence, could face a maximum penalty of life in prison if convicted of attempted murder, or a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison if convicted of assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder.

Being held in the Macomb County Jail, Schorling also is accused of escaping from the Juvenile Justice Center in Mount Clemens last May, five days after initially pleading guilty to the stabbing. However, the escape charge is pending and not part of this trial.

Lambert, who spent about three weeks at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Clinton Township and missed at least two months of classes at Romeo High, has recovered from the wound.

When she was stabbed in the hallway the morning of Sept. 27, 2004, Lambert didn't realize the gravity of it. The knife, with a 5-inch or 6-inch blade, remained lodged slightly left of the middle of her back.

"She felt a pain, didn't realize what happened," Kaplan said. "She walks into the classroom. Other students see it. A teacher sees it."

Someone not removing the knife at the scene saved her life, Kaplan said, and the weapon that Schorling had retrieved from his parents' kitchen was taken out at the hospital about one hour after she arrived.

Lambert suffered a relapse from an infection during her recovery in which doctors thought she might die, according to Lambert's mother, Michelle, who testified Tuesday.

"I thought for sure we were going to lose her again," Michelle Lambert said on the stand. "I was just terrified to see nurses and doctors running her down (to intensive care or the emergency room). They asked if we knew a pastor or a priest."

"Mr. and Mrs. Lambert almost lost a daughter at age 16," Kaplan said, calling the loss of a child "a parent's worst nightmare."

Michelle Lambert, a design engineer at General Motors Corp. for 17 years, testified that her daughter and Schorling had dated about six months until Nicole broke up with him in May 2004, near the end of the school year.

Schorling had attended Romeo High but for that school year had enrolled in at an alternative high school.

Garton said problems involving Nicole Lambert and other people at the high school led to him leaving Romeo High.

"He switched schools, not because he had to, not because he wanted to," Garton said. "He had to because of certain things going on."

Garton did not elaborate.

"The defendant was no longer welcomed at Romeo High," Kaplan said, noting that Schorling had no right to enter the school.

Garton pointed out that Schorling could have been charged as a juvenile but instead was charged as an adult.

The trial in front of Judge Peter Maceroni is expected to be completed this week as Kaplan plans to call 16 witnesses, including five teenagers, four who knew both Schorling and Lambert.

Before the trial started, Maceroni rejected Garton's attempt to have a psychologist and two social workers testify about Schorling's state of mind.

Maceroni approved two other requests by Garton -- to delay consideration of the escape charge and two excluded photos of the knife in Lambert's back.

Psychiatrist's report on teen killer delays case Judge rejects sentencing deal; teen has choice to make

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

BY AMALIE NASH
News Staff Reporter

After nearly a year of claiming he couldn't recall what happened when he shot a Pioneer High School classmate to death, Ryan Bower has changed his story, a psychiatrist said in a court-ordered evaluation.

The report was not made public, but members of the victim's family, who were allowed to briefly review it, said the psychiatrist labeled Bower as having sociopathic tendencies. They said the report also stated that Bower showed no remorse for the killing and bragged of gaining 25 pounds of "pure muscle" since his arrest and detainment.

The report was at the center of a court hearing Tuesday at which Washtenaw County Circuit Judge Donald Shelton once again delayed sentencing Bower after throwing out a sentencing agreement hammered out between a defense attorney and prosecutor in August.

Based on the psychiatric evaluation, Shelton said, he wouldn't abide by the sentencing agreement of 10 to 15 years in prison and asked Bower how he wanted to proceed. He gave Bower the choice of proceeding with sentencing or withdrawing his no contest plea to second-degree murder.

Defense attorney David Zacks asked for more time to confer with Bower, and the case was delayed for another week.

Bower, who was 16 at the time of the homicide, is accused of gunning down Jordan Coleman, 16, inside Coleman's Pittsfield Township home after the two friends skipped school together the morning of Dec. 8.

Bower maintained for months - beginning when he returned to Pioneer that morning and told the school police officer about the shooting - that he couldn't recall much of what happened. His attorney presented the court with a psychologist's report indicating he suffered a post-traumatic stress reaction to the shooting.

Bower pleaded no contest to a second-degree murder charge in August with a sentencing agreement of 10 to 15 years imprisonment. But at Bower's scheduled sentencing last month, Shelton refused to abide by the sentencing agreement without knowing more about what happened between the two teens that morning.

The sentencing agreement is below the state guidelines, which call for a minimum 12- to 18-year sentence, Shelton said. The judge ordered Bower to submit to a new evaluation by a psychiatrist, which the judge said Tuesday showed that Bower did not experience a dissociative reaction to the shooting.

The details of Bower's conversation with the psychiatrist were not revealed in court, and the judge's office said the report would not be made public.

But Coleman's family members were permitted to read the report for several minutes before the brief hearing.

Julia Coleman, Jordan's mother, said Bower implied the two boys were playing with the Colemans' shotgun, and Bower shot as Coleman was coming at him. But she said medical examiner reports show that Coleman was shot twice from behind, not in front like Bower claimed.

"He experienced no feelings or remorse," Julia Coleman said. "I'm absolutely thrilled the judge threw out the agreement. On one hand, I want this over, but on the other, I don't even think 12 to 18 years is sufficient for what he did."

Summer Vasher, Jordan's cousin, said the report indicated that Bower said he remembered what occurred that day in the spring - months before he claimed he didn't recall when he pleaded no contest to the murder charge over the summer. She also said Bower stared down Julia Coleman in the courtroom Tuesday.

"What went on with the agreement the prosecutor made wasn't right," Vasher said. "What he put up to that psychiatrist doesn't match the evidence. He's playing mind games. Jordan didn't have a bad bone in his body. His life is gone, but they need to protect the citizens by keeping (Bower) off the streets for a long time."

Zacks would not discuss the contents of the report, but said he still believes the teen had a post-traumatic stress response to the incident. He said Bower never claimed he couldn't recall the entire morning, but said he did not have a full recollection of the events and still doesn't. Bower told the police officer that day that he recalled seeing a shotgun in the hallway of the Coleman home, and the next thing he remembered was his ears ringing and Coleman screaming and bleeding.

"He gave as detailed a rendition as he could of what transpired, but there still are portions that he is unable to recall," Zacks said Tuesday afternoon.

Shelton said he had never refused to abide by a sentencing agreement between a prosecutor and defense attorney in his career, but also wasn't previously asked to depart below the guidelines. He said he needed a substantial and compelling reason to sentence below the guidelines, and didn't find one in this case.

The judge told Bower he could now be sentenced without the sentencing agreement in place, he could work out a new agreement with prosecutors within the state guidelines or he could withdraw the plea and proceed to trial.

"I reviewed the report and frankly, if he testified in accordance with what is in this report, it might be a viable defense, it might result in his conviction for murder or possibly the lesser offense of manslaughter," Shelton said. "It could result in an acquittal, or a maximum of 15 years in prison or a maximum of life in prison."

Zacks said he planned to meet with Bower and prosecutors to decide how to proceed. A new hearing date was scheduled for Nov. 1.

"Obviously we're going to take the time to weigh the options and make an informed and intelligent decision," Zacks said.

Amalie Nash can be reached at anash@annarbornews.com or (734) 994-6832.

Published October 26, 2005

Empty bowls, open hearts Fundraiser nets at least \$10,000

By Nicole Geary
Lansing State Journal

Hundreds of people lined up Tuesday at downtown Lansing's Center for the Arts for a taste of hot soup and a reminder of those who go without.

For just \$20, lunch or dinner breaks doubled as a shopping trip for pottery and a chance to help feed hungry people.

At least \$10,000 was raised for area food banks and pantries in exchange for about 800 beautiful - and empty - bowls donated by area potters.

Advertisement

"The bowls are what we come for," said Mary Avery, who picked out three creations from local potters during the 15th annual Red Cross fundraiser.

But Avery's yearly visit is motivated by more than adding to her collection. Recent disasters such as Hurricane Katrina make the cause especially important this year, she said. "Our own charities here at home are hurting because people are giving outside."

The American Red Cross Regional Food Distribution Center uses the money to operate food programs for needy people in seven counties.

"It really warms my heart," coordinator Kathe DeMara Smith said of seeing patrons dish out as much as \$100 for a simple meal of soup, bread and water.

Volunteers serve food donated by local restaurants and musicians provide free entertainment.

Chris Frierson plans to give his bowl to his mom. He was more interested in the potato soup and putting food on the table for others. "We can get some more food after this if we're still hungry. A lot of people can't."

Contact Nicole Geary at 377-1066 or ngeary@lsj.com.

Local News

State offices oversee 'Harvest Gathering'

By ERICA KOLASKI

Tribune Staff Writer

CHEBOYGAN - Those who wish to donate to the Food Bank Council of Michigan can do so this year at a number of state agencies.

Lt. Ken Holmes from the Cheboygan Post of the Michigan State Police said that the Post is participating in this year's annual "Michigan Harvest Gathering," serving as a collection site for donated goods this holiday season.

In Cheboygan, donations are being collected at the post, the Secretary of State office, and the **Department of Human Services** office (previously known as the Family Independence Agency).

Holmes said that donations should be in the form of non-perishable canned and boxed foods and that items in glass containers will not be accepted.

Donations are being accepted through Nov. 7.

Holmes said that the donations are distributed to persons in need through local charitable organizations and food pantries.

"Last year, state of Michigan facilities collected more than 90,000 pounds of food and raised \$34,000, which went directly to the Food Bank Council of Michigan," he said.

"The community's giving spirit has and will continue to make a meaningful difference in the lives of many Michigan citizens," he said.

Holmes noted that monetary donations are tax deductible. Anyone wishing to make a monetary donation may do so online at www.fbcmich.org.

Ship set to scare

Mackinaw crew to haunt locals and benefit food bank

By MIKE FORNES
Tribune Staff Writer

CHEBOYGAN - A tradition of scary sights and sounds will continue at the Millard D. Olds Memorial Moorings for another Halloween when the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Mackinaw presents its annual Haunted Ship display Saturday.

The activity will begin at 6 p.m., with the first hour geared more toward children under 12 years of age, according to Ensign Jiah Barnett, in charge of the display aboard the Mackinaw. Later that evening the spookiness will be increased for 12-year-olds and older as well as adults who may want to visit the ship between 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. All children under the age of 12 must be accompanied by an adult no matter what time they visit.

"This is the last Haunted Ship for the Mackinaw," Barnett said. "We want to finish with a bang. Hopefully it's a tradition that the new Mackinaw will pick up on."

The Haunted Ship is being held the Saturday before Halloween so that it won't interfere with community trick-or-treating, scheduled for Monday.

Admission to enter the display is at least one non-perishable food item. Last year the Mackinaw crew collected more than 1,000 non-perishable food items donated to the Cheboygan Salvation Army Food Bank, and \$200 in cash donations that will help support this year's Christmas Tree Ship.

"The community support was overwhelming," exclaimed Ensign James Conner, the Mackinaw's public affairs officer for the 2004 party. "People lined up by the hundreds in the rain to support this charitable event. Some people got scared, others laughed, but at the end of the night everyone agreed it was a great time."

The Mackinaw's crew plans to spend the entire day Saturday decorating the ship in hopes of outdoing last year's effort. Local businesses have pitched in to donate materials and cash donations to guarantee a successful display.

"The most important material for the Haunted Ship is black tarp," Conner explained. "Hundreds of feet of tarp coated the inside of the ship to set a haunted mood. By the time the crew finished decorating, the ship looked like something out of a scary movie, complete with spider webs, carved pumpkins, and creepy characters."

The entire crew of the cutter will be involved with the activity, and much of the ship will be utilized for the frightful tour. Barnett said the ship is divided into sections, and each section comes up with their own theme.

“The crew is really excited about it,” said Ensign Beth Newton, the current public affairs officer. “Some sections of the ship will be worked up into very scary things.”

The crew also decorates much of the vessel with scary props for the event. The local U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary also assists with preparations for the activity.

The Mackinaw is located at the end of Coast Guard Drive in Cheboygan.

Lansing State Journal

Letters

October 26, 2005

Donate heat aid

The Legislature is working to help Michiganders with their heating bills this winter. We can help, too.

The Board of Water and Light offers the practice of rounding off your monthly heating bill payment to the next dollar. This has helped untold numbers of customers stay warm. If you haven't been doing this, start now. If you are already rounding off and wish to add an additional \$1 or any other amount, you can call BWL Customer Service at 702-6006.

The government should not be expected to solve all of our problems. This is one that you and I can do.

Drew Moore
Lansing

Impending split sparked murder-suicide, cops say

LAPEER CITY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By James L. Smith
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LAPEER - A man killed his wife and then himself after learning of her decision to leave him, police said.

Lapeer Police Chief Todd Alexander said Lori M. Scriver-Van Meter, 43, was shot and killed by her husband, Mark J. Van Meter, 44, who then turned the gun on himself. The couple's four children, ages 16 to 20, were upstairs at the time and heard the gunshots.

The children are currently staying with grandparents, police said.

Police were called to the home about 6:25 a.m. Sunday.

Services for Scriver-Van Meter are scheduled for 1 p.m. Thursday at New Beginnings Baptist Church in Lake Orion. Visitation at the Lake Orion Chapel, Sparks-Griffin Funeral Home, 111 E. Flint St., Lake Orion, will be from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. today.

Arrangements for a Friday memorial service for Mark J. Van Meter are incomplete, said a spokesperson for the Huntoon Funeral Home in Oxford.

A brother of Scriver-Van Meter declined to comment.

In an obituary provided by the funeral home, the family of Scriver-Van Meter said she was looking forward to the birth of her granddaughter, Willow.

There was no previous indications of domestic trouble in the home, Alexander said. The family was burned out of a home on Saginaw Street last year.

Scriver-Van Meter leaves four children, Marcus, Dylan, Micah and Melinda, all of Lapeer, and her parents, Donald and Joan Scriver of Lapeer.

Tally: Hundreds homeless, at risk

By Dan Meisler

DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

October 26, 2005

About one in 480 people in Livingston County is homeless or in danger of becoming homeless, according to a one-day count conducted last week by several social service agencies.

Alissa Parks of the Homeless Continuum of Care said there are 128 people who visited the 12 participating agencies on Thursday and meet the federal definition of homelessness — that is, they have no permanent place to sleep that is suitable for humans, or are in a temporary housing institution.

Another 246 people qualified as "precariously housed," meaning they are in unstable living conditions such as staying with friends or family, Parks said.

Although comparisons with previous years are difficult because of different record-keeping practices, Parks said the combined number has been around 200 in the past.

"We assume that there are others not being counted," she said.

Of the 128 people counted as homeless, 30 were children accompanied by adults, and 14 were youths without adults.

Of the "precariously housed" group, 102 were children with adults, and 35 were unaccompanied youth.

Parks said the numbers may be incomplete because data from some local schools were not available.

Unemployment, substance abuse and mental illness were some of the reasons cited by Parks that people become homeless.

"What we're hearing anecdotally is there are lot more foreclosures," she said.

The Salvation Army has a feasibility study underway to see whether a permanent homeless shelter ought to be built in Livingston County. The charity currently operates a rotating shelter in which people are housed at various churches during winter months. But during the summer, there are no facilities available for the homeless.

"It would be a helpful resource in the community," Parks said.

She said that in the next year or two, a computer system will be put in place that can track homeless people and the services they seek more accurately.

County work will bring \$9.58 an hour, \$12.09 if no health care

Most Republicans on board oppose 'living wage'

PUBLISHED: October 25, 2005

By Chad Selweski
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Businesses who hold contracts with Macomb County government will be required to pay a "living wage" of \$9.58 an hour to their employees, under a new policy adopted by the county Board of Commissioners on Monday.

By an 18-8 vote, the commissioners approved a living wage plan designed to lift vendors' wages above the federal poverty level. For employees who don't receive health care benefits, the mandatory wage will be set at \$12.09 per hour.

"It's government's responsibility to care for the have-nots in our society," said Democratic Commissioner Jon Switalski of Warren, co-author of the proposal.

The pay requirement is similar to living wage ordinances enforced by three Michigan counties -- Wayne, Washtenaw and Ingham -- and 16 Michigan cities, including Warren and Eastpointe. More than 100 major cities across the United States also impose wage standards.

About 50 supporters of the proposed Macomb policy, including numerous local union officials, were on hand Monday and many commented prior to the board vote. Three representatives of the business community urged rejection of the proposal.

The vote came down along partisan lines, with Democrats supporting the plan and only Republican Commissioner Sue Rocca of Sterling Heights joining the majority. If, as expected, the plan receives final approval from the board Wednesday, it will take effect Jan. 1.

Grace Shore, president of the Central Macomb County Chamber of Commerce, said government-mandated wages would raise business costs and lead to higher unemployment.

Lil Adams, CEO of the Sterling Heights Area Chamber of Commerce, said that imposing new costs makes little sense at a time when the economy is struggling and many companies are closing across the county. Adams also

questioned the wisdom of a policy that says all workers should earn enough to raise their income above poverty.

"There are employees who are not worth \$5 an hour anymore," she said.

"Talk to employers and they'll tell you there are workers who can't even write their name."

Adams' remarks inspired a spirited retort from Genafer Hintz of Mount Clemens, a college graduate who is working three part-time jobs.

"I make \$6.50 an hour and I'm pretty damn sure I'm worth more than that," Hintz said. "And ... I'm not alone. I know many people who are just like me."

Hintz, who received a bachelor's degree in history in 1994 and a teaching certificate last year, said she is struggling to pay off \$43,000 in student loans by working in a coffee shop, a clothing store and as a substitute teacher. Supporters said living wage ordinances in other cities and counties have not led to higher contract costs and instead "leveled the playing field" in the bidding process. Contracts awarded to the lowest bidder, advocates said, should not reward companies who pay low wages.

"We're going to set the example in Macomb County. We are going to raise the bar," said Democratic Commissioner Paul Gielegem, who authored the proposal with Switalski. "It has been proven in study after study that living wage ordinances increase workers wages but do not result in significant cost increases."

Republican commissioners tried and failed to postpone the matter, arguing that far too many unanswered questions remained. GOP commissioners were told that the cost to the county and the number of contractors affected had not been determined.

Commissioner Peter Lund, a Shelby Township Republican, said he worried about the impact on a county budget that posted a \$3 million deficit last year and is expected to suffer up to \$10 million in red ink this year.

"This is the most fiscally irresponsible board I've seen," said Lund. "If you want to do something like this, you have to pay for it."

To soften the proposal's impact, county board Chairwoman Nancy White announced three amendments: an exemption for part-time employees, including county workers; an exception for vendors who employ 10 or fewer workers; and a June 30, 2006, effective date for the Community Mental Health Department.

That department will be impacted the most because it relies on 124 contractors.

Vendors will not be required to comply with the living-wage rule until their current contract expires, at which time all bidders will face the same requirement. The county already has a policy for construction contracts that requires all bidders to pay the prevailing union wage for each job at the work site.

Local CAA facilities open after renovation

By Roland Stoy/Staff Writer
Coldwater Daily Reporter

October 26, 2005

BATTLE CREEK — The Branch County office of the Community Action Agency (CAA) is now open and doing business as usual, with the exception of utility relief, at 285 N. Michigan Ave.

This is following renovations to correct some water damage that occurred to the building, according to Tony Garland, associate marketing director out of Battle Creek. The facility had been closed for a number of days last month.

Garland, of the South Central Michigan CAA headquarters, said a new roof has been installed, and repairs to the foundation have been made.

Wal-Mart Memo Suggests Ways to Cut Employee Benefit Costs

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE
and MICHAEL BARBARO

The New York Times

Published: October 26, 2005

An internal memo sent to Wal-Mart's board of directors proposes numerous ways to hold down spending on health care and other benefits while seeking to minimize damage to the retailer's reputation. Among the recommendations are hiring more part-time workers and discouraging unhealthy people from working at Wal-Mart.

In the memorandum, M. Susan Chambers, Wal-Mart's executive vice president for benefits, also recommends reducing 401(k) contributions and wooing younger, and presumably healthier, workers by offering education benefits. The memo voices concern that workers with seven years' seniority earn more than workers with one year's seniority, but are no more productive. To discourage unhealthy job applicants, Ms. Chambers suggests that Wal-Mart arrange for "all jobs to include some physical activity (e.g., all cashiers do some cart-gathering)."

The memo acknowledged that Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, had to walk a fine line in restraining benefit costs because critics had attacked it for being stingy on wages and health coverage. Ms. Chambers acknowledged that 46 percent of the children of Wal-Mart's 1.33 million United States employees were uninsured or on Medicaid.

Wal-Mart executives said the memo was part of an effort to rein in benefit costs, which to Wall Street's dismay have soared by 15 percent a year on average since 2002. Like much of corporate

America, Wal-Mart has been squeezed by soaring health costs. The proposed plan, if approved, would save the company more than \$1 billion a year by 2011.

In an interview, Ms. Chambers said she was focusing not on cutting costs, but on serving employees better by giving them more choices on their benefits.

"We are investing in our benefits that will take even better care of our associates," she said. "Our benefit plan is known today as being generous."

Ms. Chambers also said that she made her recommendations after surveying employees about how they felt about the benefits plan. "This is not about cutting," she said. "This is about redirecting savings to another part of their benefit plans."

One proposal would reduce the amount of time, from two years to one, that part-time employees would have to wait before qualifying for health insurance. Another would put health clinics in stores, in part to reduce expensive employee visits to emergency rooms. Wal-Mart's benefit costs jumped to \$4.2 billion last year, from \$2.8 billion three years earlier, causing concern within the company because benefits represented an increasing share of sales. Last year, Wal-Mart earned \$10.5 billion on sales of \$285 billion.

A draft memo to Wal-Mart's board was obtained from Wal-Mart Watch, a nonprofit group, allied with labor unions, that asserts that Wal-Mart's pay and benefits are too low. Tracy Sefl, a spokeswoman for Wal-Mart Watch, said someone mailed the document anonymously to her group last month. When asked about the memo, Wal-Mart officials made available the updated copy that actually went to the board.

Under fire because less than 45 percent of its workers receive company health insurance, Wal-Mart announced a new plan on Monday that seeks to increase participation by allowing some employees to pay just \$11 a month in premiums. Some health experts praised the plan for making coverage more affordable, but others criticized it, noting that full-time Wal-Mart employees, who earn on average around \$17,500 a year, could face out-of-pocket expenses of \$2,500 a year or more.

Eager to burnish Wal-Mart's image as it faces opposition in trying to expand into New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, Wal-Mart's chief executive, H. Lee Scott Jr., also announced on Monday a sweeping plan to conserve energy. He also said that Wal-Mart supported raising the minimum wage to help Wal-Mart's customers.

The theme throughout the memo was how to slow the increase in benefit costs without giving more ammunition to critics who contend that Wal-Mart's wages and benefits are dragging down those of other American workers.

Ms. Chambers proposed that employees pay more for their spouses' health insurance. She called for cutting 401(k) contributions to 3 percent of wages from 4 percent and cutting company-paid life insurance policies to \$12,000 from the current level, equal to an employee's annual earnings.

Proposed tax law could hurt non-profit organizations

By Tanya Berkebile, Cadillac News

October 26, 2005

A new tax law proposed by the Joint Committee on Taxation could hit non-profit organizations - again.

In a report published in January, the Joint Committee on Taxation recommends the U.S. tax code be changed to enforce a \$500 limit on charitable deductions for clothing and household goods per taxpayer per tax year. Currently there is no limit on charitable deductions for clothing and household goods.

Cecil McNally, executive director for Goodwill Industries of Northern Michigan, fears that if this law passes, it would limit the number of donations.

"It is unfortunate, but many people lose incentive to donate," McNally said. "If you aren't going to get any kind of incentive, why not just sell the stuff at a garage sale? What would make them take the extra effort to donate than to throw out?"

George W. Kessinger, CEO of Goodwill Industries International, said the proposal is aimed to crack down on tax cheats, while unfairly penalizing charities.

"Donated household items provide a vital revenue stream that allows us to offer critical social services to millions of people worldwide," he said in a statement. "A \$500 cap is both arbitrary and unfair and will be a deterrent to many people who wish to make large donations."

McNally said although there are always some people who will be dishonest and overestimate on donations, he believes the vast majority are honest about estimating their donations.

"Looking at clothing and household items, I have noticed people tend to underestimate," he said. "A fair number of people actually don't even itemize. They give and don't want anything in return."

Goodwill does have a sheet with suggested values for clothing and other items, but they do leave it up to the contributor to value the items.

Last year, the organization faced a similar problem when Congress passed the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004. One of the regulations in the act said once a car is given to a charity, the person donating the vehicle can now only take a deduction for what the car sells for at an auction.

"That was all accomplished in six to nine months, it was one of those things that we should have paid more attention to. We will this time," McNally said.

Earlier this year Goodwill was only receiving half of its normal car donations. McNally said it has since picked up a little, but it is still not what it used to be.

Salvation Army extends deadline

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, October 26, 2005

By George Jaksa

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

The Salvation Army of Genesee County has added a third week for the needy to apply for Christmas assistance, said Connie Peters, development director.

She said the extra week, Monday-Nov. 4, was added because of overwhelming response to the early signups that concluded Friday. Two offices will accept applications between 9:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. during the added week. They are at the main office, 211 W. Kearsley St., Flint, and the Beecher Corps, 1475 W. Coldwater Road, Mt. Morris Township.

The program is intended to help those who would otherwise be unable to celebrate Christmas, Peters said.

During the 2004 Christmas season, 13,127 individuals received food, clothing and gifts and 2,088 children received winter coats.

Details: (810) 232-2196.

Editorial

Stalking the Poor to Soothe the Affluent

The New York Times

Published: October 26, 2005

Impoverished Americans are being set up as targets this week in Congress's desperate attempt to find budget cuts after four straight years of tax cuts for the affluent. House Republicans propose harmful cuts in Medicaid access and benefits, while forcing another 10 hours of work from welfare families and giving states free rein to pile more draconian reductions onto the most vulnerable citizens.

This gross political posturing does not even translate into true savings. While imperiously proclaiming cuts of \$50 billion over five years, Congressional leaders are determined to fiddle more harmfully with the revenue half of the budget and to pass an additional \$70 billion in upper-bracket tax cuts.

The proposals would have the federal government - supposedly the protector of the neediest - give the states broad leeway to restrict current benefits; to require co-payments by the poor for medicine and for care by doctors and emergency rooms; and to cut preventive care for children, who represent half of the Medicaid roll. The food stamp program would probably also be hit with a \$1 billion cut, and even welfare payments to elderly people who are sick would be crimped by using federal bookkeeping tricks.

One particularly boneheaded proposal would severely cut the funds for child support enforcement by \$4 billion. This program currently returns \$4 in benefits from natural parents for every dollar invested.

The proposals are so appalling that moderate Republicans are even said to be considering a show of life on the floor. In contrast, Senate Republicans are shaping cuts that would spare the poor's Medicaid and other safety nets, while finding savings in Medicare overpayments.

The Senate approach is obviously preferable, but it is also rooted in the G.O.P.'s pre-election fiction that overspending is the basic problem. The tax cuts should be scuttled and the poor protected.

Our View: Welfare changes could help beneficiaries get back on their feet

Midland Daily News 10/25/2005

Welfare is an important part of our American social policy. Most of the time it serves as a way for families to get back on their feet in hard times.

There are also those who misuse the system and in turn, waste taxpayers' money.

So as Michigan lawmakers search for ways to cut back on welfare costs and take a look at who is getting welfare and why, we think it a good idea to assess how welfare checks are distributed.

Michigan is the only state in the region that does not limit welfare benefits to five years.

Some provisions that lawmakers are looking at are to see who have been taking benefits for a long time and why. They should have a mental or physical disability that does not allow them to work, or those receiving benefits should be taking care of a disabled relative.

However the Department of Human Services will be starting a pilot program later this year in several counties that will add additional staff to help find parents not paying child support, help with job training, and help beneficiaries get into treatment programs.

This is a good step in helping wean beneficiaries that may not be as economically dependent on welfare benefits to take advantage of a training program that can help them in the long run of being able to stand up on their own and provide for themselves and their families.

These checks should be done very carefully to make sure that those who need the benefits are not being kicked off unnecessarily.